



The Education of a British-Protected Child: Essays

By Chinua Achebe

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A collection of autobiographical essays from the celebrated author of *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe's characteristically eloquent and nuanced voice is everywhere present in these seventeen beautifully written pieces. From a vivid portrait of growing up in colonial Nigeria to considerations on the African-American Diaspora, from a glimpse into his extraordinary family life and his thoughts on the potent symbolism of President Obama's elections—this charmingly personal, intellectually disciplined, and steadfastly wise collection is an indispensable addition to the remarkable Achebe oeuvre.

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Editorial Review

Review

“African literature is incomplete and unthinkable without the works of Chinua Achebe. For passion, intellect, and crystalline prose, he is unsurpassed.”

—Toni Morrison

“An eclectic and thorough view of Achebe in his longtime roles as writer, father, and teacher. [Written] with the same generosity and humility that have always distinguished his work. . . . [Achebe] strives to act and to write with empathy and nuance rather than with fanaticism. . . . [He writes] in his characteristically gentle narrative style, that way he has of seeming to be in casual conversation, discussing matters big and small with an interested and sympathetic companion.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Measured but firm. . . . Achebe’s deeply humane intelligence reverberates.”

—*Newsday*

“Sharp and fresh. . . . Achebe’s assessment of colonial contact [has] gravitas and pathos. . . . He is one of world literature’s great humane voices.”

—*The Times Literary Supplement* (London)

“A welcome return. . . . [Achebe] writes firmly and vividly. . . . [He] tangles further, and profitably, with the obsessions that have defined his career; colonialism, identity, family, the uses and abuses of language.”

—*The New York Times*

“Quite wonderful: it gives the reader the feeling of sitting across the table and talking on easy terms with one of the world’s deepest and broadest literary minds, gaining insight into Achebe’s life and work, but also into Nigeria, colonialism, and the complicated interplay of European and African culture. . . . Rich and insightful.”

—*The Buffalo News*

“Timeless. . . . Achebe has stayed an engaged and provocative voice. There’s plenty of pluck and fight in this collection. . . . [His] arguments are well reasoned, interesting, and of..

About the Author

Chinua Achebe is a prominent Nigerian writer who is famous for his novels describing the effects of Western customs and values on traditional African society. Achebe's satire and his keen ear for spoken language have made him one of the most highly esteemed African writers in English. He has published novels, essay collections, poetry, short stories, and juvenile fiction. Among his works are *Things Fall Apart*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, *A Man of the People*, *Arrow of God*, and the notable collections *Morning Yet on Creation Day* and *Hopes and Impediments*. A recipient of the Man Booker International Prize, he is currently the Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Michael Page has been recording audiobooks since 1984 and has over two hundred titles to his credit. He has won several AudioFile Earphones Awards, including for *The War That Killed Achilles* by Caroline Alexander and *The Lies of Locke Lamora* by Scott Lynch. As a professional actor, Michael has performed

regularly since 1998 with the Peterborough Players in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He is currently a professor of theater at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he lives with his wife, Jane, and two daughters, Camilla and Chloe (when they are not away at college). He has a particular interest in Shakespeare and Eastern European theater and travels frequently to Hungary and Romania.

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MY DAUGHTERS

All my life I have had to take account of the million differences—some little, others quite big—between the Nigerian culture into which I was born, and the domineering Western style that infiltrated and then invaded it. Nowhere is the difference more stark and startling than in the ability to ask a parent: “How many children do you have?” The right answer should be a rebuke: “Children are not livestock!” Or better still, silence, and carry on as if the question was never asked.

But things are changing and changing fast with us, and we have been making concession after concession even when the other party shows little sign of reciprocating. And so I have learned to answer questions that my father would not have touched with a bargepole. And to my shame let me add that I suspect I may even be enjoying it, to a certain extent!

My wife and I have four children—two daughters and two sons, a lovely balance further enhanced by the symmetry of their arrivals: girl, boy, boy, girl. Thus the girls had taken strategic positions in the family.

We, my wife and I, cut our teeth on parenthood with the first girl, Chinelo. Naturally, we made many blunders. But Chinelo was up to it. She taught us. At age four or thereabouts, she began to reflect back to us her experience of her world. One day she put it in words: “I am not black; I am brown.” We sat up and began to pay attention.

The first place our minds went was her nursery school, run by a bunch of white expatriate women. But inquiries to the school board returned only assurances. I continued sniffing around, which led me in the end to those expensive and colorful children’s books imported from Europe and displayed so seductively in the better supermarkets of Lagos.

Many parents like me, who never read children’s books in their own childhood, saw a chance to give to their children the blessings of modern civilization which they never had and grabbed it. But what I saw in many of the books was not civilization but condescension and even offensiveness.

Here, retold in my own words, is a mean story hiding behind the glamorous covers of a children’s book:

A white boy is playing with his kite in a beautiful open space on a clear summer’s day. In the background are lovely houses and gardens and tree-lined avenues. The wind is good and the little boy’s kite rises higher and higher and higher. It flies so high in the end that it gets caught under the tail of an airplane that just happens to be passing overhead at that very moment. Trailing the kite, the airplane flies on past cities and oceans and deserts. Finally it is flying over forests and jungles. We see wild animals in the forests and we see little round huts in the clearing. An African village.

For some reason, the kite untangles itself at this point and begins to fall while the airplane goes on its way. The kite falls and falls and finally comes to rest on top of a coconut tree.

A little black boy climbing the tree to pick a coconut beholds this strange and terrifying object sitting on top

of the tree. He utters a piercing cry and literally falls off the tree.

His parents and their neighbors rush to the scene and discuss this apparition with great fear and trembling. In the end they send for the village witch doctor, who appears in his feathers with an entourage of drummers. He offers sacrifices and prayers and then sends his boldest man up the tree to bring down the object, which he does with appropriate reverence. The witch doctor then leads the village in a procession from the coconut tree to the village shrine, where the supernatural object is deposited and where it is worshipped to this day.

That was the most dramatic of the many imported, beautifully packaged, but demeaning readings available to our children, perhaps given them as birthday presents by their parents.

So it was that when my friend the poet Christopher Okigbo, representing Cambridge University Press in Nigeria at that time, called on me and said I must write him a children's book for his company, I had no difficulty seeing the need and the urgency. So I wrote *Chike and the River* and dedicated it to Chinelo and to all my nephews and nieces.

(I am making everything sound so simple. Children may be little, but writing a children's book is not simple. I remember that my first draft was too short for the Cambridge format, and the editor directed me to look at Cyprian Ekwensi's *Passport of Mallam Illia* for the length required. I did.)

With Chinelo, I learned that parents must not assume that all they had to do for books was to find the smartest department store and pick up the most attractive-looking book in stock. Our complacency was well and truly rebuked by the poison we now saw wrapped and taken home to our little girl. I learned that if I wanted a safe book for my child I should at least read it through and at best write it myself.

Our second daughter, Nwando, gave us a variation on Chinelo's theme eight years later. The year was 1972 and the place Amherst, Massachusetts, where I had retreated with my family after the catastrophic Biafran civil war. I had been invited to teach at the university, and my wife had decided to complete her graduate studies. We enrolled our three older children in various Amherst schools and Nwando, who was two and a half, in a nursery school. And she thoroughly hated it. At first we thought it was a passing problem for a child who had never left home before. But it was more than that. Every morning as I dropped her off she would cry with such intensity I would keep hearing her in my head all three miles back. And in the afternoon, when I went back for her, she would seem so desolate. Apparently she would have said not a single word to anybody all day.

As I had the task of driving her to this school every morning, I began to dread mornings as much as she did. But in the end we struck a bargain that solved the problem. I had to tell her a story all the way to school if she promised not to cry when I dropped her off. Very soon she added another story all the way back. The agreement, needless to say, taxed my repertory of known and fudged stories to the utmost. But it worked. Nwando was no longer crying. By the year's end she had become such a success in her school that many of her little American schoolmates had begun to call their school Nwando-haven instead of its proper name, Wonderhaven.

2009

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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